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'The River of Gang Violence'

Harry Cooper Jr.



Sam Hodgson

Harry Cooper Jr. is chairman of the city of San Diego's Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention.

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Despite heavy job loss and a volatile economy, the number of murders in San Diego dropped from 55 to 41 last year. The number of gang-related murders also dropped from 21 to nine.

From a statistical standpoint, the city's gang crime was practically unchanged last year. Murder went down, but attempted murder went up. The number of shootings and stabbings was nearly identical. The total number of crimes attributed to gang members moved from 1,013 to 1,004.

But the statistics don't show everything. To get a community perspective on gang trends in San Diego, I sat down this week with the Rev. Harry Cooper Jr., chair of the city's Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention, which aims to reduce gang violence by working with social service organizations. Cooper is pastor of Southeast Community Presbyterian Church and describes himself as a "ground zero" person for gang issues.

We talked about defining what constitutes a gang, their activities in San Diego, efforts to mitigate the presence of gangs and what the average person can do to help.

How did you become involved with addressing gang issues?

When you get the call that a young man has died and you have to go see his mother and see the impact of a death on a family, it leads you to a place that says 'I need to do something.' From that time, almost 12 years ago now, it's been an area that I've worked in.

Having had a number of funerals from members of my congregation as well as members of the community, and seeing the negative impact that some bad choices and decisions have, encourages me to make good ones to help other young men and women.

A few readers wanted me to ask this question: Are there differences between gangs based on ethnicity?

Almost all of them, in order to be labeled in this area, are doing some form of crime. What differences might occur are the hierarchy and how they're run. You have some differences in where allegiances lie or who the shot-callers are. You might have a shot-caller in San Quentin (State Prison) ... (that) may very well be able to call the shot from jail and it actually happens on the street.

Some groups are more loosely based, so there's not a sense of a hierarchy or one person that's going to be able to call the shot. So you begin to see that and you begin to see some that have a cultural awareness. There are differences and there are similarities.

San Diego Police reported last month that the number of crimes attributed to gang members was virtually the same in 2008 and 2009. Do you think the level of gang activity in San Diego also remained the same?

The statistics have a way of being somewhat able to be manipulated by whoever is massaging those statistics. Whereas on one hand you did have fewer gang homicides, according to the police in 2009, and fewer violent gang actions, some things aren't quite as bad as they were the year before. The number of crimes though may be similar, they simply differentiated themselves.

Whatever level you use to measure gang activities in San Diego, do you think it has gone up or down, or a different direction?

I think it has been consistent. You did get through a summer without a violent homicide in 2009, which is a very helpful, encouraging statistic. And yet, you know there are still young men and women who are on the outs of society and are choosing negative behavior patterns.

I think as chair of the commission, I'll always caution the commission, or the police, or anybody, from taking credit for the successes without knowing that there are just existential circumstances about why numbers trend in a certain direction. Just as fast as they trend one way, they can trend another, and unless you're willing to take the blame, you can't take the credit.

So how do we determine if the city's efforts impacted gang activities in the last year?

The one thing [you don't] know is how many crimes with gang involvement would have occurred had you not been doing positive things. You can tell how many actually happened, but not knowing how many were diverted -- that's also another statistic that can't really be assessed.

So whereas statistics may say things flat-lined, which is definitely a good thing, another generation might have been diverted from actually going in because of the efforts that have taken place for the last two or three years. It's very difficult to change a ship that is out to sea to go in the opposite direction. In some ways, that's what you see.

If you had a choice between taking someone out of a gang or preventing someone from ever going in, which would have a greater impact?

The one thing that is consistent is that most [gang members] have caused harm to someone, whether it was their property, their sense of safety, their emotional sense of safety, their psychological wellness. Some harm has taken place, so if I can prevent harm from ever taking place, that would be the most significant impact.

But then, you know, in the same way, if you are harming and I can stop you from harming, then I do a value as well.

Yeah, I'm not saying there's a clear answer here.

Let's just say this: I teach school. I mean, I have substituted in high schools and elementary schools in San Diego, because I think prevention is something I may be leaning more toward in my own personal passions. If I can catch you before you go wrong, I think that is a good thing.

How closely related are schools to gang activities in San Diego?

Generally, if you're really deep in the gang life and culture, you're probably not going to school. The school plays a role in trying to identify trends with students that they may have. The commission includes county schools and city schools, as well as many other agencies, because

we know everybody plays a role.

Almost every one of the gang members went to a school at some point in time before they chose another pathway. So we realize that if we can catch them earlier in their school age and engage them intellectually, maybe that will change their behavioral patterns.

It's an awareness that there are many tributaries that lead to the river of gang violence and gang lifestyle.

OK, so let's look at this from a parent's perspective. At what age should parents be concerned that their children are at higher risk of joining a gang?

Adolescence -- when children are beginning to test the boundaries of who they are and recognizing who they are in the context of society. I think that's one of the key times a parent would want to be actively involved in their child's life.

But it's hard to just drop out of the sky when your child turns 12 but you neglected them when they were 1 through 11. You want to walk with them through the whole journey and be actively engaged with them throughout.

What do you think the average person can do to impact gang problems in their neighborhood?

Choose not to live in fear. And it is a challenge. I think it was once said that the only way for evil to prosper is for good men and women to remain silent.

The good men and women of San Diego and San Diego County have a right to live in peace but also a clairvoyant call to live with courage. When the lights are out, anything can prosper. When no one is speaking up, when everyone is afraid, the evil continues to prosper.

It takes courage, no question. There are forces out there that would prefer the common vernacular that "snitches get stitches" and things like that. Well, you know, one has to determine whether one will live on my knees or die on my feet. And that becomes one's code of conduct.

My task hopefully, is to say to all: Walk in courage.

-- Interview conducted and edited by KEEGAN KYLE

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